CHAPTER ONE 1838-1863

THE CITY ON THE FRONTIER

Louisville was at the crossroads as the nation moved west

THE first quarter-century covered in this story of Louisville opened with the coming of the gas light and closed with the city having passed safely through its time of crisis in the Civil War.

It, the 1838-1863 period, was a colorful, rambunctious interlude of rapid advancement in Louisville, a time when its strategic location as a river-railroad crossroads point gave it a role in the nation's great push toward the west that was unmatched by any other city.

Although the period had started with the city disenchanted by its introduction to the railroad, within 15 years rail lines had connected Louisville with the cotton states to the South, with St. Louis to the west, Pittsburgh to the east and the Great Lakes region to the north.

Meanwhile, river transportation, stimulated by the canal around the falls, had increased to the point that Louisville truly could boast—and it did—of being the "Gateway to the South."

As a consequence, city population more than tripled, new industries, banks and business houses were opened, and Louisville took its place as a commercial, social and cultural oasis standing at the eastern edge of the vast frontier spreading out to the west. The log houses and buildings of the pioneer days gave way to substantial stone and brick structures that mirrored the architectural tastes of the French and Germans who had settled in the city in the early 1830's.

Thus, in 1851, Louis Kossuth, a Hungarian exile who visited Louisville, wrote:

"We were astonished at the expanse of Louisville which, we were told, 25 years ago was but an insignificant town. The streets are wide and brilliantly illuminated at night, the houses substantial, with neat fronts and back gardens; carriages are numerous; Negro footmen wear livery; everything looks more aristocratical than economical."

Even before that, Louisville was one of the few places in America where Charles Dickens, the English author, had found anything good to write about during a tour of the country. After a stay in the city in 1842, Dickens had written in part:

"We slept at the Galt House, a splendid hotel, and were as handsomely lodged as though we had been in Paris, rather than hundreds of miles beyond the Alleghenies."

One important reason for the amazing progress Louisville made was the introduction of gas on a commercial basis. The Louisville Gas and Water Company had been chartered on February 15, 1838, but it was not until Christmas Day the following year that the first plant was completed and gas was supplied to the mains and service pipes of the city.

Although the company had been chartered to provide both gas and water, it never did go into the water business. So, in 1842, when the State Legislature authorized the city to build a waterworks, the name was bobbed to the Louisville Gas Company, and that service emerged as its one function.

This new illuminant gas quickly was adopted in stores and in most of the homes of the wealthier residents, a step that attracted and fostered new industry and business growth. Another year and Louisville was boasting that it was better supplied with gas and was better lighted than any city in the United States, and that it had the

COMING OF THE GASLIGHT An 1846 sketch proves Louisville's claim to being the best lit city in the U.S.